

January 1960

St. Pete trademarks: sunshine and benches

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Recommended Citation

Dunn, Hampton, "St. Pete trademarks: sunshine and benches" (1960). *Hampton Dunn Phototouring Florida Collection*. 295.

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Photouring Florida

By HAMPTON DUNN



ST. PETE TRADEMARKS: SUNSHINE AND BENCHES

By HAMPTON DUNN

ST. PETERSBURG --- St. Petersburg's sunshine and green benches combine to create the illusion that life gets off to a good start at 75, not 40. So says an account of this city's trademarks.

The green benches, which have provided curbside perches for Winter visitors for more than 60 years, are on the way out under orders of City Council. But the city fathers decreed new resting places must be made of aluminum tubing and natural finish wooden slats of either Douglas fir or clear heart redwood "dressed, free of knots and splinters."

Father of the famous benches was Noel Mitchell, who came here from Rhode Island and went into the real estate business (doesn't everyone?). He purchased the two-story wooden Durant Building at Fourth and Central, site of the Rutland Building today. His ground floor offices became the hangout for idle tourists who appreciated his comfortable chairs. But the office became too crowded to work in.

Mitchell came up with the idea of constructing comfortable benches on the sidewalks. Other merchants followed suit. Everybody was happy. In 1914, Mayor Al Lang proclaimed the benches to be painted green.

One writer described them, thusly: "These slatted divans serve as mediums of introduction, with the weather the opening and principal topic. Operations, symptoms, and remedies run a close second. The benches are the open-air offices of the promoter, the hunting grounds of the real estate 'bird dog,' a haven for the lonely, and a matrimonial bureau for many. They have figured in fiction, swindles, and divorce courts."

